

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ A Lutheran Way of Life

John Kleiner writes to his beloved seminary community...

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

For twenty-six years, while I was teaching at the Seminary, I appreciated the opportunity that we had in our community for weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. That appreciation was greatly enhanced last year, the first year of my retirement, when I was hospitalized in the fall: what a blessing it was for me to be included in the weekly celebrations. The body and blood of Christ shared with faculty and students in my hospital room, around our dining room table after I was discharged from the hospital, and then back in the Seminary chapel when I was sufficiently recovered —this was truly the presence of Christ for me, assuring me of God's ongoing love and grace and providing me with sustenance for a journey that otherwise could have been dark indeed.

I don't know if you have reflected much on the fact that we celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly at the Seminary but in many of the congregations from which you have come or to which you will be going when your Seminary training is completed this is not the standard practice. Why do we celebrate the Lord's Supper every week at the Seminary? Is such a practice an integral part of a *Lutheran way of life*?

Martin Luther apparently felt he was facing this question in 1530 when he wrote a treatise entitled *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord* (*Luther's Works* 38: 97-137). His treatise is really a pastoral letter exhorting those Christians that saw themselves as part of the reformation movement he had started to make the celebration of the Lord's Supper central to their way of life.

Luther presents the Lord's Supper as "a sacrament rich in grace" and "full of benefit and salvation" (p. 104). It has been appointed for us out of God's "great affectionate and boundless love" (p. 102) and out of "the grace and mercy he has shown us in Christ" (p. 105). Do you recognize here the foundational themes of Luther's theology, namely, the grace of God in Christ? God/grace/Christ: these provide the point of orientation for a Lutheran way of life and they are communicated to us in a powerful way in the Lord's Supper. Reflecting on Jesus' words as Paul records them in 1 Corinthians 11:24, "Do this in remembrance of me," Luther asks: "Who remembers God sufficiently? Who can praise him too much? Who can thank him too much? Who can honor Christ's passion too much?" (p. 106). To participate in the Lord's Supper is to worship God as God wants to be worshiped: "Now if you want to engage in a marvelous, great worship of God and honor Christ's passion rightly, then remember and participate in the sacrament" (p. 106).

If a Lutheran way of life that recognizes the centrality of the Lord's Supper is profoundly theological, that is, centred on the grace of God offered to us in Christ Jesus, it is also profoundly human. In the Lord's Supper our gracious God meets us where we are as beloved children who are still very much flawed human beings. The context for a Lutheran way of life continues to be the reality of sin. In his *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord*, Luther speaks of the "four companions" that dog the steps of the Christian pilgrim: "the flesh, the world, death and the devil" (p. 131). One of the

benefits of the Lord's Supper is that in this sacrament "faith is thus continually refreshed and renewed, ... the heart is also at the same time refreshed ... and made strong ... to resist sin and all temptations of the devil" (p. 126). To encounter the living Christ under the very ordinary elements of bread and wine is to receive a tangible, visible, and personal ("given for *you* . . . shed for *you*") assurance of God's acceptance not only of our faith but also of our humanity. The Lord's Supper is sustenance for the very earthly "expedition" we are on (p. 132). It brings us not only into relationship with God in Christ but also with our neighbour. When we receive the sacrament our heart is "refreshed anew in its love of the neighbor and is made strong and equipped to do all good works" (p. 126).

You may well have heard the concern raised that the regular, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in our congregations will diminish its importance and make it less meaningful for us. This has certainly not been my experience with weekly celebrations of Holy Communion at the Seminary, and it does not appear to have been Luther's either. In his *Large Catechism* Luther writes that "the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger" (*Large Catechism* 5:24). Further along, still commenting on the Lord's Supper, Luther adds: "Surely it is a sin and a shame that, when he [God] tenderly and faithfully summons and exhorts us to our highest and greatest good, we act so distantly toward it, neglecting it so long that we grow quite cold and callous and lose all desire and love for it" (*Large Catechism* 5:67). In Luther's view it is not too frequent celebrations that appear to pose dangers, but their opposite: the failure to commune frequently and regularly can cause us to "grow quite cold and callous and lose all desire and love" for the Lord's Supper.

It is clear from reading our Lutheran Confessions that the practice of weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper was originally an essential part of a Lutheran way of life. (See *Augsburg Confession* 24:34 and *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 24:1.) I trust you can also see that such a practice is consonant with the spirit and thrust of Luther's sacramental theology. It is true that what I have presented above does not require weekly celebrations. In fact to establish regulations and traditions that would threaten Christian liberty is something the Confessions explicitly reject. Luther writes in the *Small Catechism*: "No one is to be compelled to believe or receive the sacrament, no law is to be made concerning it, and no time and place should be appointed for it" (*Small Catechism* Preface 21).

One of the foundational principles of a Lutheran way of life continues to be the freedom of a Christian as spelled out by Martin Luther: in the relationship with God, "a Christian is the perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" (*The Freedom of a Christian, Luther's Works* 31: 344). So when I encourage you to give serious consideration to the practice of weekly communion in the congregations you will be serving I am far from urging on you some new regulation to bind you and your congregations in the life of faith. I am simply trying to point out the centrality of the Lord's Supper to the original understanding of a Lutheran way of life and asking you to be on the cutting edge of those who are trying to live out that Lutheran way of life as it was intended.

Thanks again for your "partnership in the gospel" —particularly in this past year. I wish you much joy and blessing in the practice of Christ's ministry— whatever form that may take.

Peace,

John W. Kleiner.



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John has been married for almost thirty-eight years to Heather who serves as a chaplain for LutherCare Communities in Saskatoon. They have two sons, John Paul and Mark, who are struggling writer/musicians in Toronto.